The Young Mates were Tough Buckos . . .

FROM A CAGE THEY

FORTY YEARS AGO a coast-to-coast wire story that featured the name of "Hell Fire" Pedersen, made Victoria's waterfront buzz with interest. Interest that stemmed from the fact that he was known here. But ask any old-timer today what Pedersen did and he'd be a bit vague: "Killed a man on some sailing ship," is the probable answer. It would be partly right.

"Hell Fire" was his unlikely name, for when I met him, one afternoon in mid April, 1918, he was a mild appearing character, looking a little as if he'd just stepped from the pages of a story by W. W. Jacobs. Although it's 41 years ago, I remember he had on a well-worn "Christy stiff" hat, a little high in the crown, a blue serge suit that shone a little at the elbows and seat, and around his throat I think he wore a muffler, perhaps to hide the lack of a collar. He spoke in a quiet tone, almost apologetically. At his trial he did the same.

He appeared that afternoon at the headquarters of the old B.C. Provincial Police down on Bastion square to report three deserters from his ship, the "Puako." Which was no joke in those war time days of shrinking man power. I was a pretty junior member of the famous constabulary on those days, and someone (maybe old Dennis Cox or George Hood) gave me the nod to see what the derby-hatted stranger wanted. When Pedersen removed his hat, wiped the sweat band then mopped his head, I noticed his mouse colored hair was thin on top, his eyes a sort of in between color you wouldn't remember again, and with a seafarer's work-worn hand he pulled from an inside pocket three Board of Trade seaman's certificates giving descriptions and pictures of the missing men. I studied the three faces, wooden and expressionless, and took note of the circumstances and the three descriptions.

In due course they were circularized, and the immigration people notified.

Sailing ships in Esquimalt weren't uncommon in those days for high war time charters (stemming from terrific submarine losses) had pulled a lot of the old square riggers out of retirement.

I remember the name of Pedersen's ship, the "Puako" because I asked him what it meant. He said it was a Hawaiian word that meant "flower of the pineapple." It took me 40 years to correct the error; a few weeks ago I ran across a Hawaiian dictionary that told me "Pua" was 'flower' and "ko" 'sugar cane.' Pua'ko is flower of the sugar cane.

According to Pedersen the three deserters slipped overboard at night to a skiff trailing astern and the boat was found next day near Millstream at the back of Esquimalt Harbor. As they hadn't been picked up by the time the Puako sailed, replacement hands were found in Victoria. The runaways were lucky to miss the voyage.

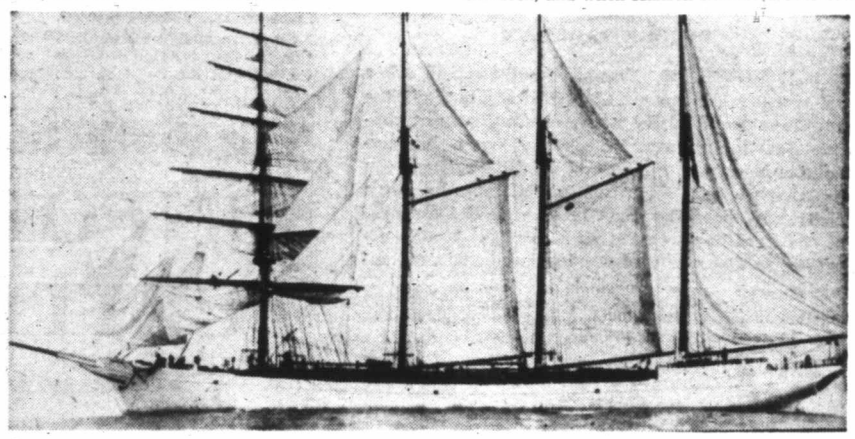
A YEAR LATER the same inoffensive looking skipper in the same shiny blue suit, had been dubbed 'Hell Fire" Pedersen and . . . in a cage! A cage set up in a New York courtroom, where he was charged with second degree murder, an anomaly in Canadian law, for it means "unpremeditated" murder. Backgrounding the accusation was an extraordinary tale of stark terror coupled with savage brutality, indirectly linked with current social unrest.

Skipper Adolph Pedersen, about 50 then, was of Scandinavian parentage, and had been master of sailing vessels for 16 years, 12 of them in command of "Puako." She was a four-masted barquentine dubbed a skysail yarder, just over 1,000 tons, built at Oakland, California, in 1902 by W. A. Boole. At the time of its embroilment with the law the vessel was part of the Rolph Navigation Company's fleet, senior member being Mayor Rolph of San Francisco. Her sides and deck were unorthodox in their sheer, for like most coast built windjammers she was built to carry lumber above and below decks. Including the hands picked up in Victoria, her crew mustered 15. The skipper's two sons, Leonard, 22, and Adolph Jr. 18, were first and second mates, a couple of husky, two-fisted buckos, each with a yard wide streak of sadism that got full play under the indulgent eye of father.

The crew, on the other hand, one can imagine as a sorry aggregation of rejects and misfits, most of them pressured into a choice between the hazards of mine and sub-infested waters (in a slow wooden sailing ship) and the muddier and deadlier risks of Flanders. Youngest member was John W. Campbell, a 16-year-old high school boy from Iowa, who'd run away to sea for adventure. Then there was dark-skinned, illiterate, Jack Joe, a Hawaiian Islander, and Jimmy Campbell, a Canadian from Ontario. Along with them was Fred Grielen, an Englishman; William Jones from Wales, Bill Matteson from the U.S.; an Irishman called Ed Reilly, Jorgensen, the cook (who could never keep warm) and Einar Svenson from Sweden, who could never keep imaginary rats out of his bunk! There were others, of course, but these are our witnesses.

Hansen, the main thorn in the side of authority, cursed the injustice of the cook's death and the Pedersens decided to take him in hand. From then on, hardly a day went by without the Dane getting some form of physical punishment. Finally, on July 30, off the African coast, Hansen was handcuffed, legironed and shoved in the lazarette, a small oil and paint-smelling airless locker. His week in solitary confinement must have been interrupted, now and again, by beatings administered by the Pedersens, for when he stumbled out on deck to painfully blink in the sunlight on August 6, crewman said his face was so blood clotted and swollen they didn't recognize him!

Next afternoon while he groggily hung over a foremast yard trying to fist in the bunt, the youngest Pedersen cursed up at him for his slowness. "Come here, you . . . !" yelled the youthful second mate when the Dane regained the deck, and when Hansen shambled over toward



This was the hell-ship—the Pedersen s Barquentine Puako.

IT WAS ON APRIL 27, 1918, the Puako left Victoria with a full cargo of lumber, above and below decks, and cast loose from the tug Clayburn off Cape Flattery, to set a course for a three-month voyage to Cape Town, South Africa. A day or two at sea and the crew shook down, after a fashion; all except one, Oscar Hansen, a Dane, who somehow or another sensed a new world and a new deal for foremast hands. He endeavored to prove it occasionally by a small merchant seaman's rule book. In the words of "Hell Fire" Pedersen, he was "the worst thing a skipper has to content with . . . a sea lawyer." Ultimately Hansen was a martyr to the rule book.

Off watch, the Dane worked on the crew to stand up for their rights and privileges, and the reaction came not from Pedersen but from his two sons. The 18-year-old second mate started the course of discipline with brass knuckles, and when the crew got sullen he improved the treatment. One hand, shipped at Vancouver, said that for 90 days he was never without a black eye.

"Jump to it!" was the everlasting cry of the Pedersen brothers, while the toe of a boot or a flying fist caughtup with the laggard.

After a month of this hazing, mutiny brooded in the foc'sle, and finally Jorgensen, the cook, decided to remove the after deck tyranny—by putting ground glass in the Pedersen hot cakes! The plot was divined the instant "Hell Fire" crunched particles of glass between his false teeth, and his remedy was a simple one. He made for the galley and slugged the cook insensible!

Treatment of the crew went from bad to worse, and at the end of the second month (on June 23) they were in the South Atlantic, when the second mate not only chased the cook out of the galley, but clear across the deck and over the port rail.

"Man overboard!" was the instant cry from someone aloft. But the tradition of the sea (like the cook) went by the board. Jack Joe, at the wheel, looked appealingly at the first mate for direction. "Stay on your course!" snapped Leonard Pedersen, as the cook's head bobbed farther and farther astern.

him, someone aloft spotted the tell tale glint of brass knuckles on the mate's right hand. "Look out, Hansen!" came a warning cry.

But Hansen, too tired and listless to catch the meaning, caught instead the mate's brass-bound fist on his jaw. The seaman slumped to the deck, and it seemed to take him an age to regain his knees.

Finally he swayed up on his feet and staggered aft.

Pitilessly young Pedersen followed him, spurring his progress with his boot. Finally Hansen broke into a stumbling run, and as Pedersen still pursued, the Dane, in sheer desperation ducked under the after rail and sprang overboard. There was a fair sea running at the time, and it's just as well, to keep the record straight, to record that the older Pedersen brother, seeing what happeped, yelled orders that would bring the ship up into the wind, preparatory to lowering a boat. Just at that moment his father appeared on deck.

"Who ordered you to change course?" he barked at the Hawaiian helmsman.

"The first mate, sir," said Joe. "There's a man overboard."

"To hell with him!" roared Pedersen. "Get back on the course."

As the helmsman twirled the spokes of the wheel he cast a quick glance astern and saw the unfortunate Hansen hanging on to the log lie.

"He's on the log line!" shouted the Hawaiian.

"I can't see him," said Pedersen senior, with a cursory look astern. Abruptly, he turned on his heel, and went below.

Below decks, maybe Pedesen did some thinking about the incident, for next day he had the crew mustered aft, and one by one had a talk with them in his cabin. Each was asked, in turn, to recite the events of the previous day. When they told the factual story Pedersen cautioned them with, "You know you can get into trouble for telling a story like that."

From his desk he drew written statements for each man to sign, statements to the effect that Hansen fell overboard in a gale force wind when it was impossible to turn the ship and pick him up. As for the cook's death, he had committed